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# The Philosophical Foundations of Mormon Theology

Sterling M. McMurrin

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OF MORMON THEOLOGY

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*To the Memory of My Father*

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**THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS  
OF MORMON THEOLOGY**

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Professor McMurrin's longer study, *The Theological Foundations of the Mormon Religion*, is also available from the University of Utah Press.

## THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF MORMON THEOLOGY

### I

Cultivated theological ideas are commonly underwritten by metaphysical concepts which may be unexpressed as implicit assumptions or affirmed explicitly as an ordered and systematic statement. Metaphysics is an attempt on the most ultimate questions of which the human mind is capable, ontological questions, for instance, that search for an understanding of the very ground of being or of the nature of the fundamental structure of reality, or questions concerned with the foundation of value, or of logic, or with the relation of ideas about the world to the world itself. Metaphysics proposes to describe reality in its most general and fundamental aspects. It is concerned not with particular things that exist, but rather with the nature of existence and the character necessary to whatever exists — not with particular events in the world process, but rather with such questions as whether the world is in process, and what it means to be in process.

If, therefore, the question is raised, "What is the basic philosophy of Mormonism?", what is sought primarily is the set of fundamental concepts about the nature of reality that is assumed by Mormon theology and perhaps also by Mormon ethics. These ideas have for the most part been advanced dog-



matically rather than achieved by speculative reasoning, their justification resting on the claim of authoritative insight and revelation. The Mormons hold, nevertheless, that their concept of reality is entirely compatible with the attested findings of the sciences.

The metaphysics has never received a technical structuring and systematic formulation, as Mormon intellectual effort in the past has been directed especially toward the constructive elaboration of theological doctrine with comparatively little attention to its philosophical implicates or assumptions. In recent years competent Mormon thought has been concerned largely with specialized sociological and historical studies, with criticism, and with the reconciliation of the revelation to science.

It is obvious that whatever metaphysical considerations may be basic to the theological doctrine, Mormon theology developed for the most part within concrete historical contexts and was not derived from the metaphysics. And yet although it is not chronologically prior, the metaphysics by its very nature has a kind of logical priority over the theology. For although the theological doctrines are not necessarily deducible from the metaphysical principles, the metaphysics once defined sets the limits for and in a sense indicates the direction of theological development, for the strong intellectualistic tendencies of Mormonism guarantee a continuing effort to rationalize the theology on philosophical foundations.

## II

It is generally conceded that the fact of existence is a mystery. That is, it is in principle not possible to answer the question, "Why is there anything at all that exists?" or "Why is there a state of *being* rather than of total *non-being*?" But after the fact of existence itself is accepted as a mystery, a number of important and interesting questions immediately come to the fore, and the answers that are provided them define the character of a metaphysics and determine the general nature of a philosophy, which must thereafter draw endlessly on their implications.



Among the persistent metaphysical questions that are basic to any full philosophical inquiry are those referring to the structure of reality in terms of its number and its nature. The question of number in metaphysics was formulated during the early stages of Greek thought and asks whether reality is "one" or "many." Those philosophical systems which hold that the totality of reality consists of one single entity are commonly designated by the term *metaphysical monism*. The contrary view, that the world is composed of many realities, is of course known as *metaphysical pluralism*.

Among the influential thinkers of the occident whose philosophies have been monistic or near monistic in their quantitative descriptions of ultimate reality are Parmenides, Plato, Philo, Spinoza, Hegel, F. H. Bradley, and Josiah Royce. For the most part monism or at least the monistic tendency has characterized the dominant trend in past occidental philosophy and has had a major influence on the character of Christian theology. It has also been a basic viewpoint in much oriental thought and religion, as for instance in the ancient Taoist philosophy of China, in the main body of Hindu philosophical literature, the Upanishads, or in the mysticism that dominates much of India's religion.

Included among the occident's major pluralistic philosophers, or those with a strong pluralistic bias, are Empedocles, Democritus, Aristotle, Epicurus, Lucretius, William of Occam, John Locke, Leibniz, John Stuart Mill, William James, and John Dewey.

It must not be supposed that all monists are in agreement in their description or justification of the monistic character of reality, or that pluralists agree with one another in the details of their positions. On the contrary, much diversification even among basically similar systems has always been usual rather than exceptional in philosophy. However, as might be expected, it is not uncommon for metaphysical monists to be in general agreement on other matters that relate to their monism and, of course, the same is true of pluralists. For instance, those advocating monism are quite commonly either rationalists or

mystics, or both, while pluralism is as frequently associated with empiricism. For obvious causes, rationalism and mysticism as ways of knowing are productive of monism, while empirical method tends to generate pluralism.

Mormon philosophy is an unqualified commitment to metaphysical pluralism. The concept of reality as a composition of independently real entities is established explicitly in certain statements that have been accepted by Mormon writers as normative for doctrine, and it can be discerned as a fundamental presupposition of popular Mormon thought by inference from innumerable ideas and attitudes that are commonplace with the Mormon people.

Nowhere is this pluralism more evident than in the doctrine of God, for instance, where not only is the Godhead defined as three independently real persons, in contrast to the common Christian notion of the Trinity, that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one in substance, but where also there is the idea that for the total universe there is a multiplicity of personal deities who are genuinely real as individuals. The importance of this fact of the theology cannot be overstated, for it is a characteristic of monistic systems that where there is a concept of divinity, the divineness is itself clearly identified with oneness.

Perhaps not less important is the rigorous distinction in Mormonism that is made between God and the world, a distinction that also characterizes biblical thought and is a defining property of all theistic religious philosophy. Monism, of course, tends in principle to identify God with the world, which is a threat of pantheism.

A more interesting pluralistic element of Mormon thought is the belief that the individuality of a human person is guaranteed by the fact that the "intelligence" which constitutes his essential nature is an uncreated and underived and therefore an ultimate constituent of the universe. On the Mormon view the world is a composite of particular persons, things, and events, and these can in no way be interpreted simply as aspects, facets, or expressions of one all-inclusive solitary reality. For the Mormons, individuality is a given and guaranteed fact of the struc-

ture of being and the universe is a pluriverse. This is not to say that it is necessarily a disordered collection, or that the persons, events, and things that compose it are not importantly and perhaps even organically related to one another. It is to say rather that the relations that obtain among the entities that compose the world are external to those entities, that the being of particular objects or events is autonomous. The mystery of existence attaches to the individual taken in and of itself, for its being is in its uniqueness as an individual, and not in its function in a system or in its expressiveness of a larger whole.

Although Mormonism defends the veridical character of religious experience, it has known little or nothing of that form of mysticism common in the orient and not unknown in occidental Christianity that encourages an identification of the worshipper with God or with an impersonal absolute. There has been no impetus from the religious experience, therefore, in favor of monism. On the other hand, of course, it may be that the intense pluralism of Mormonism is in itself a factor that tends to discourage mysticism.

In Mormon thought there has never been a commitment to rationalism, empiricism, or intuition as a primary method of knowledge. On the contrary there has been instead a tacit and uncritical respect for all three as ways of knowing. The Mormon view can perhaps be best summarized as commitment to the methods of science, which effect a conjunction of reason and sensory experience, and to revelation. The epistemological character of revelation has not been defined, but certainly the belief in revelation has not produced in the Mormon people any inclination to discount the reality of the world that is known through the ordinary sensory experiences, which is the world that is a composite of genuine individuals or particulars. Nor is there any tendency to hold that this is a lesser reality, or even an order of reality of lesser value. On the contrary, the accepted revelations have supported both the reality and value of the particular objects and events of the material temporal world and have even described spiritual reality in pluralistic terms.

Among the implications of the quantitative metaphysical pluralism in Mormon philosophy, certainly nothing is more evident or more important than that in principle this radical pluralism militates vigorously against absolutism. The importance for philosophy, theology, religion, and even for science of absolutistic concepts or the belief in the reality of an absolute entity can hardly be overestimated. The uncompromising pluralism of Mormon metaphysics definitively establishes a foundation for doctrine that in various ways contradicts much that has long characterized both Christian and Jewish thought. Not only the conception of God but also the concept of the nature of man and of his relationship to God, and the assessment of his affairs, are importantly affected by that pluralism.

It is in the non-absolutistic descriptions of God that Mormon theology has its chief variance from the traditional theologies of the Christian churches. The absolutistic doctrine, common to most of the official creedal statements and theological discussions, is best defined by the normative concepts of "unconditioned" and "unrelated." An "absolute" being would be unconditioned in the sense that whatever qualities were possessed by him would be possessed unconditionally, there being no conditions, for instance, upon his goodness, his creative power, his thought processes, or his will. Such an absolute being would necessarily be unrelated, because if he were genuinely related to anything outside himself, that object or event would in effect constitute a condition upon him. An absolute reality would by definition comprise all reality, both objects and events, within itself; otherwise it would be related and conditioned and therefore, by definition, not totally absolute.

Now the Christian theology of the major traditions has not been committed to a complete absolutism in its concept of God for the obvious reason, among others, that this view would preclude the possibility of the kinds of relationships that obtain between God and the world and God and man that are fundamental to the biblical religion. A more or less thoroughgoing absolutism has occasionally appeared in the form of pantheism, which identifies God with everything and everything with

God, but official Christendom has vigorously opposed pantheism as being a form of atheism.

Nevertheless, the Christian doctrine on God has generally gone as far in the direction of absolutism as the theologians could conveniently move it, compromises being made with full absolutism apparently only where there appeared to be no alternative. Such a compromise, for instance, would be the not uncommon view that the divine thought processes are conditioned by the requirements of logic, though even this is sometimes denied by the insistence that there is no ground for assuming that God is reasonable in the human sense of reasonableness. Indeed, sophistication in theology has usually suggested that the divine nature is ineffable and that descriptions of God, therefore, should ideally be negative rather than positive, asserting what, in human terms, he is not, rather than what he is. This method of negation has supported absolutism.

The traditional theology has approached the problem of the relation of God to the world primarily through the doctrine of the "fiat" or "ex nihilo" creation, which is that a divine command produces the world where nothing existed. If God is totally the creator of the universe, creating all reality except himself, where before there was nothing but himself, then the universe is totally subservient to him and there is no object or event in it that is not fully under his dominion. Under this doctrine God creates the universe in accordance with laws and prescriptions which are of his own making. There is no law or principle beyond himself which he must respect or be subject to in his creative act. Independently of the world's coming into being by the divine fiat, only one thing can be said about existence, that "God is." Moreover, his creation of man and the world is not necessary; that is, in creating them he wills freely, for he could will to not create them.

It is obvious that the established doctrine of creation contributes importantly to the absolutistic description of God, because under it God is related only to a universe which is totally his creature and which is therefore utterly contingent upon him and is under the dominion, hence, of his power. As

is seen in any discussion of the problem of evil, this doctrine occasions considerable embarrassment for both theology and religion, as it appears to assign to God the responsibility for everything that occurs in the world, including events that are immoral or otherwise evil. Consequently much theological effort has been expended to justify the absoluteness of God's power with his vindication of all responsibility for those elements in his creation that are not compatible with his absolute goodness.

Now Mormon theology denies the doctrine of creation, holding that the world in its ultimate parts is uncreated and that the divine creative activity is exhausted in the structuring and transformation of self-existent ingredients. The theology therefore explicitly assigns an environment to God, a genuine environment which is not ultimately a product of his creative act and which therefore constitutes in a sense a condition upon him, since he is necessarily related to it. The theology describes four factors in the environment to which God is related: the uncreated intelligences which constitute the central being of all other persons, whether human or divine; the uncreated entities that comprise the basic material of the physical universe; the uncreated space and time that God and the world are *in*; and certain "principles" in terms of which reality is structured and to which the very status of God himself is subordinate.

Most of the problems that occur in theology or the philosophy of religion, as for instance the questions referring to human nature, the moral quality of human volition, or the occasion and justification for evil, are affected by the absolutistic or non-absolutistic factors in the conception of God. It is of major importance, therefore, in understanding the Mormon religion, that the explicit and quite radical non-absolutistic character of Mormon metaphysics and theology be fully recognized.

Nowhere is this importance greater than in the theory of God's relation to space and time. It is commonly known that the traditional Christian theology, both Catholic and Protestant, describes God as non-spatial in character, by which is meant that God has no spatial dimensions and is without spatial loca-

tion. On this view, which has historically dominated occidental theology, God is not subject to space. Rather, space is subject to him, because he created it at the creation of the universe. Without the creation there was only God — nothing more, not even empty space. On this ground the traditional theology holds that, to put it crudely, being nowhere in particular, God is everywhere in general. This view is related to the common Christian belief that God is immaterial, without a body, because anything bodily or material must have spatial dimension and location.

What is not so commonly known, although it is certainly not less and perhaps more important, is that Christian theology of the traditional form holds that just as God is non-spatial, he is non-temporal. That is, he is not subject to time but rather time is subject to him. God created time as well as space and therefore he is in a sense outside of or independent of time. This timeless character of God is what is usually intended in technical theological or philosophical discourse by the term "eternal." What is meant by eternal is not that God has an endless existence but rather that his being is timeless in that he is not involved in the temporal sequence of past, present, and future. Again, since God is not anywhen in particular, he is in a sense everywhen in general. He encompasses time.

Under such a theory, the events of the past or future of the temporal world of which men are a part constitute a kind of constant present for God, so that it is possible for the Catholic philosopher and theologian St. Thomas of Aquinas, for instance, to say that whereas "time has a before and an after," "eternity is simultaneously whole." This is to say in effect that for God all things happen simultaneously. That this view occasions interesting problems having to do, for instance, with God's relation to human history, human freedom, and human achievement, is obvious. That in the incarnation of God in Christ, God entered into the temporal order of human history is a common Christian dogma. On this doctrine Christ is in a sense the intersection of eternity and time. But this only accents



the strange distance that separates God from the world of human struggle, aspiration, and tragedy.

Contrary to the traditional instruction, Mormon theology clearly describes God as spatial and temporal in character, both in the sense that space and time are uncreated elements of his environment and that he is therefore *within* them rather than *outside* of them, and that he has a definite spatial and temporal location. God is somewhere and at some time, just as are human beings, and the temporal order of past, present, and future is genuinely real to him as it is to them. Yet even though Mormon doctrine describes God as subject to space and time, it also holds that in certain ways he transcends the limitations imposed by them. His presence, for instance, is everywhere by virtue of his spiritual influence, or of the power of his creative word, while his divine knowledge anticipates the future even though the future is yet unexperienced, unique, and undetermined.

There are numerous important implications for religion resident in the doctrine that God is a spatial and temporal being. Among these in Mormon theology are the belief, contrary to the verdict of Christianity generally, that God is an embodied being with a spatially configured form, and the belief that not only is heaven located somewhere but that the eternal life of a heavenly being is temporally ordered. Among the implications of a somewhat different type is the positive estimate, characteristic of the Mormon religion, on the intrinsic worth of material things, including the human body, and on the ultimate value of temporal human enterprise.

It would be difficult to overestimate the importance in Mormon thought of the temporalistic concept of God for the related views on human nature and human endeavor. Where God is conceived of as non-temporal in character, man and his affairs, being *in* time, belong to a totally different order of reality. The history of religion indicates that this infinite gap between the eternal creator and the temporal creature has sometimes produced a negative evaluation of man and his affairs, an estimate that when uncorrected by other factors in the culture

has threatened a loss of human dignity and a deterioration of the quality of human effort. When it is believed seriously that God in some way composes all time, so that the future of men is already in his present, it may be difficult to believe with equal seriousness that the future of men is in a genuine sense undetermined, depending for its course in part at least upon the decisions which are made by them freely and upon their moral commitment, or upon the strenuousness of their endeavor.

It is obvious that its pluralistic metaphysics and resulting non-absolutistic theology offer Mormon philosophy a most attractive framework for the discussion of the problem of evil, the most persistent of all questions attending a theistic world view. A Mormon theodicy can describe the uncreated elementary character of the material universe as the occasion for natural evil, and can further vindicate God by assigning the responsibility for moral evil to the freedom of will possessed as an essential property by the uncreated and underived spirits that are a "given" in the original structure of the universe.

Finally, mention may be made of the relevance of the Mormon belief that God has a genuine environment and is a temporal being to the discussion of the divine personality. Of surpassing importance to popular Christian religion as well as to technical theology has been the historical fact of the confluence of Greek metaphysics and Hebrew religion in the early centuries of Hellenistic Christianity, a complex of circumstances resulting inevitably in the application of descriptions designed for impersonal eternal absolutes to the personal living God of the biblical tradition. The survival of the personality of God has under such conditions long taxed the best theological talent and has quite certainly affected the character of popular worship. In recent years the attempt in personalistic psychology and metaphysics to construct an adequate definition of personality has raised the fundamental question whether the very meaning of personality does not entail external relationships for the person. It has long been commonly held in Hindu metaphysics that the personal God of theistic religion cannot be identified with the ultimate absolute.

### III

Now when attention is turned from the question of the quantitative structure of reality to that of its nature considered qualitatively, the issue for Mormon philosophy is equally definite. The problem here is not whether the universe is a genuine "universe" as against a "multiverse," but rather whether there is only one or more than one "kind" of reality. Here again the terms "monism" and "pluralism" are appropriate.

The typical form of *qualitative metaphysical pluralism*, of course, is the familiar idea that the sum of reality is exhausted by a dualism of mind and matter. There have been exceptions as in the instance of the philosophy of Spinoza, who regarded thought and extension (mind and matter) as but two of an infinite number of aspects of God. It is important that the usual mind-matter dualism holds that mind and matter are orders of reality that are basically qualitatively different. In the typical view, for instance, matter occupies space, where mind does not. Matter is subject to deterioration and disintegration, where mind may be regarded as immortal. This kind of dualism has been common in occidental thought for the past three hundred years, but it was not a well developed or widely accepted theory in the ancient world or even in the Middle Ages. The clearest influential statement of it was made by the French mathematician and philosopher René Descartes in the seventeenth century. Although Descartes was a Catholic who believed that his theory was compatible with Catholic orthodoxy, the dualism which he helped to foster has since been looked upon with more favor by Protestants than by Catholics. It took a new and influential form, for instance, in the metaphysics of the Protestant German philosopher Immanuel Kant and has figured since in much psychological as well as theological discussion.

The major alternatives to mind-matter dualism are two types of monism, *materialism* and *idealism*. Materialism holds that all reality is matter, or, more commonly, that nothing is real except matter in motion in space. Materialistic metaphysics was not uncommon among the ancients, being held, for in-

stance, by Democritus and by the Greek and Roman Epicureans. In a form inclined strongly toward mechanism and determinism, it has been quite common in modern times, especially in France during the period of the French Revolution and in Germany during the latter part of the nineteenth century. Among influential modern materialists have been the British philosopher Thomas Hobbes, Denis Diderot, the editor of the French *Encyclopedia*, the German biologist Ernst Haeckel, and the German philosopher Ludwig Büchner. Materialists have commonly held that such apparent non-material realities as mental phenomena are simply the product of the functioning of matter. On this theory, for instance, when the body dies and therefore ceases to function, the mind or spirit, which has no reality in itself, ceases to exist.

Idealistic monism, of the type referred to here, is the view that whatever is real is either mind or the product of mind and is therefore in a sense mental in character. In metaphysical idealism the material world is ordinarily regarded as genuinely real but simply as having a kind of reality that is akin to the nature of mind and mind activity. Contemporary idealists, as might be expected, often make much of the recent developments in the physical sciences that have revolutionized the scientific conception of the nature of matter. Among the chief contributors to and defenders of idealism have been Leibniz, George Berkeley, Hegel, Lotze, Josiah Royce, and Borden Parker Bowne.

On the question of the qualitative nature of reality, the Mormon position is perhaps best described as fundamentally monistic but with an important dualistic facet. The dualism lies in the fact that there is a sharp distinction between mind and matter, or spirit and matter. In Mormon theology it is clearly enunciated that man as a living soul is a composition of intelligent spirit and material body. In this sense the Mormon position is similar to that of Descartes and other typical dualists. The spirit is real in and of itself and is separable from the body, as at death, and continues to exist after the separation. For that matter, of course, considering the Mormon doctrine of

pre-existence, a doctrine which is uncommon in occidental religion, the spirit is held to exist prior to its union at birth with the body.

But there is an underlying monism in the fact that the Mormon metaphysics describes both spirit and matter by essentially the same categories. This is a most important difference that distinguishes the Mormon position from the typical Cartesian dualism that holds that ultimately spirit and matter are fundamentally different in quality. Now it is well known that in Mormon philosophy spirit is described, somewhat loosely, as a type of refined matter. Spirit occupies space, has location, and is, in principle at least, not totally different in character from matter. It is, of course, an error to suppose that the Christian dualists' argument for the reality of spirit as an immaterial substance is a logical contradiction. This is a question of fact, not of logic. The term "substance" as employed in technical theology or metaphysics does not mean "matter," as it so commonly does in ordinary discourse. Therefore it is not a logical contradiction to talk about immaterial substance even though in fact there may not be such a substance.

Now if the question is raised of the implications for Mormonism of this qualitative monism, the reply again is that the implications are important and far reaching. Quite certainly one of the dominant and most interesting characteristics of Mormonism, its *naturalism*, is related importantly to this facet of the metaphysics. The term "naturalism" is commonly employed to designate a philosophy that denies the "supernatural," where "supernatural" refers to an order of reality fundamentally different in character from the natural world that is known through the ordinary sensory experiences or as the object of scientific investigation, the world of causal relationships that is presumed to be described by natural law.

Occidental theistic religion in general asserts the reality of the supernatural and ordinarily holds that the supernatural order, which is presumed to include God, the angels, and perhaps the minds or spirits of human beings, is a higher form of reality that has a kind of metaphysical priority over the natural

world. The usual Christian theory of miracles, for instance, is that in miracle the supernatural intrudes upon the natural in such a way as to set aside the ordinary processes that are described by natural law.

Now in this matter Mormonism adopts a rather uncommon position. It asserts the reality of God, angels, and immortal spirits, and recognizes that these are neither ordinary objects of sense perception nor subject to scientific investigation. To this extent it is similar to the religions that assert the supernatural. But the difference lies in the fact that in Mormon philosophy and theology, that which the others term supernatural is declared to be natural and to be akin in character to the familiar order of nature. This difference, of course, would be simply a matter of disagreement in the usage of words were it not for the fact that in the Mormon position there is a genuine continuity in the nature of reality that denies the traditional decisive break between the two orders. This is attested by such factors as the Mormon denial of eternity in the sense of timelessness, the doctrine that God has both temporal and spatial location, and the metaphysical monism that describes a spiritual entity as material rather than immaterial. Nowhere is the Mormon naturalism more in evidence than in the typical treatment of miracle. The traditional notion of miracle as a suspension of natural law is usually denied by Mormon writers in favor of the interpretation that an event is miraculous only in the sense that the causal laws describing it are unknown. The expansion of knowledge to include, for instance, such knowledge of the event as is available to God would cancel out its miraculous character. From the divine perspective there are no miracles.

The naturalistic quality of Mormon philosophy is relevant to numerous important facets of the thought, attitude, and practice of the Church, among which quite certainly are the high evaluation placed on the human body together with the positive attitude toward sex, the affirmative estimate of human character and of human accomplishment, the intimate involvement of religion with the daily and mundane tasks of individuals and society, the general this-worldliness of the religion, even in its

theology, and the enthusiasm for natural science, all of which characteristics have been and are quite typical of the faith of the Mormon people. Indeed, it is not entirely inaccurate to describe Mormonism as a kind of naturalistic humanism within a general theistic context.

#### IV

Another problem fundamental in the concept of reality that was formulated in the early era of occidental philosophy and has figured prominently in Mormon thought is the question whether in an ultimate sense reality is changeless or changing, whether the universe is static or dynamic. The metaphysical views that in one way or another have held that the world is without process are usually designated in philosophic discourse by the term "being," while a position that describes reality as dynamic is called a metaphysic of "becoming." As might be supposed, the monists, who have held that the world is fundamentally one, have frequently been advocates of a doctrine of *being*, where the pluralists have usually been philosophers of *becoming*. To the former group, for instance, belong Parmenides and, in his concept of the highest reality, Plato, while in the latter can be found Leibniz and William James.

Parmenides, who laid the main foundations of the metaphysics of being and who represents it as he does monism, in its most extreme form, insisted that the world is without change or motion of any kind. The observations of movement that men commonly have simply attest the unreliability and deceptive character of the sensory apparatus. As a rationalist, Parmenides held that genuine reality is known not by sense perception but rather by reason, and reason, he and his disciples insisted, demonstrates conclusively that the world is absolutely static. By ingenious techniques involving logic and mathematics they undertook to establish that the world is not at all what it appears to be, either in its apparent multiplicity or its dynamic process. There was, of course, vigorous opposition to the Parmenidean philosophy. Even before Parmenides, the philosopher Heracleitus, who is the author of the famous saying



that one cannot step in the same stream twice, held that the world is in constant motion and therefore is always becoming something else. Nevertheless the doctrine of *being* rather than *becoming* was dominant in the ancient world, with Plato, for instance, the philosopher who most influenced Christianity, holding that although the world of objects and events that are known through the senses is a dynamic world of motion and change where there is genuine process taking place in time, it is at best a lower order of reality. The highest reality known to the reasoning and intuitive mind but not to the five senses is, he insisted, a world of entities that exist in neither space nor time, that have no beginning and no end, and are totally free from motion, change, or process. These are Plato's timeless, motionless, static Ideas or Universals, the foundation of all existence.

Through the mediation especially of neoplatonism, the doctrine of *being* affected the basic structure of Christian philosophy and theology resulting, for instance, in descriptions of God that draw heavily on the impersonal platonic universals, with important consequences, as has already been indicated, for the biblical personalistic concept of God. But at least in the modern world the philosophy of *becoming* has played a major role. It has enjoyed, of course, the support of modern physical science which, especially in recent years, has revealed much of the dynamic character of the universe, and has been greatly affected by the biological sciences with their interest in growth and evolutionary development. But even independently of science and on a speculative basis the idea of *becoming* achieved wide acceptance especially in the nineteenth century. It is evident, for instance, in the works of the celebrated German romanticists, Friedrich Schelling, Johann von Goethe, and G. W. F. Hegel, as well as in the writings of Karl Marx. Today the foremost names among occidental philosophers, as for instance Bertrand Russell, John Dewey, Alfred North Whitehead, and Henri Bergson, have been identified with the philosophy of *becoming*.

It is of major importance to Mormon doctrine that it is grounded in the idea that the universe is for the most part

dynamic in the sense of there being a kind of cosmic evolution with the world moving endlessly in time toward goals which when reached inevitably propose others beyond. On the Mormon view the universe is incomplete, and it is an open universe in which there have always been and always will be, through a history of infinite temporal duration, ends importantly to be achieved. It is a universe in which human souls encounter one another and their world in moral conflict, in which there are real dangers and real losses, but in which there are gains in the achievement of moral goodness, truth, and beauty that are genuinely to be made.

Now it is interesting that Mormon philosophy is in certain ways committed to a fully radical concept of *becoming* that goes so far as to describe God himself as being in process. The importance of this for the theology is entirely obvious, as it relates to the fundamental conflict that has long plagued religious thought between God as a static absolute being for whom there can remain nothing to be achieved, and God as an active purposive being whose purposes are operative in the temporal history of mankind. The Mormon philosophy of *becoming* allows a description of God as subject not merely to internal process, as in the instance of Hegel's absolute, but subject as well to development through the setting up and achievement of ends by processes involving relationships with an external environment and within contexts constituting predicaments of genuine difficulty. This doctrine insures to the believer that whatever value gains are made in human experience are made genuinely for the universe and that they as well as failure, tragedy, and loss are just as real from the divine perspective as from the human. It may very well be this pervasive belief that more than anything else has guaranteed to Mormonism an utter seriousness of life and moral endeavor, a seriousness which has been established to a great extent in Protestantism, for instance, by the doctrine of human depravity. In abandoning the doctrine of depravity, the Mormons might well have surrendered the chief religious ground for their moral consciousness had they not oriented their commitments to the ideal that

in some way even God and the universe depend on human moral endeavor. That such a view is a radical departure from the traditional absolutistic conception of God's being is obvious to anyone aware of the character of the mainstream of Christian philosophic and theological activity.

## V

If the question is raised whether according to Mormon philosophy there is anything at all in the structure of reality that has the stable permanence described by the philosophic concept of *being* as opposed to *becoming*, the answer is clearly affirmative. For stability is believed to characterize the purposes of God, or his goodness, or his commitment to the worth of human personality, or countless other properties assignable to the divine nature. But beyond this type of *being* there is the problem of whether in what might be called the structure of reality as such there is an unchanging factor or element. It has always been difficult if not impossible for philosophers of *becoming* to avoid the belief that even the reality of change itself implies the presence of something unchanging which constitutes the criterion and measure of change.

The Mormon philosophy appears to find an unchanging reality in at least two directions in its metaphysics. In the first place there is the belief that the dynamic processes of the universe, which include both material and spiritual reality and which embrace even the character of God himself, are orderly processes in the same sense that is intended when one says, for instance, that the natural sciences discover order in the structure and causal behavior of the physical world. More than that, it is commonly held in Mormonism that the so-called natural laws, descriptions of the causal processes of the natural world, are but a part or a facet of the total structuring of all reality which may be said, therefore, to be determined by principles that have the stability requisite to underwrite its cosmic orderliness. Such principles, to employ a term that seems to suggest the intended meaning, are believed by the Mormons to be external to or independent of God in the sense that he is not their

creator and that he, moreover, is in a very real way subject to them. Indeed, the position is sometimes taken that God's very status is determined by his regard for these factors that are given in the impersonal and uncreated structure of reality. This is a radical departure from the traditional Christian doctrine that everything is subject to the intellect and/or will of God and also from the position of modern personalistic metaphysics that commonly holds that personality is the ultimate reality in the universe in the sense that the supreme personality cannot be subject to anything impersonal. For Mormonism the universe is a "pluriverse" of both personal and impersonal elements, and these all have ultimate reality and they genuinely condition one another.

The second direction in which one may look for *being* in the Mormon metaphysics is marked by the *value universals*. In the matter of values, particularly moral values, Mormon philosophy assumes an absolutistic character. The meaning of "absolutism" here is in opposition to "relativism," where a relativistic ethic or morality holds that an act, for instance, is good or bad relative to the circumstances under which it occurs. A thorough-going moral relativism insists that there are no fixed criteria of moral values that can be asserted independently of the particular time, place, and conditions of specific acts. It was against such relativism as advocated by the sophistic teachers of ancient Athens that Socrates attempted to define fixed and stable values that are independent of any and all circumstances. And on the basis of Socrates' teachings, Plato erected a metaphysical system that held that such values as truth, beauty, goodness, justice, and piety are entities that have real being in the universe. Such entities, he held, are independent of place and time. They never come into existence and they suffer no change and no extinction. They simply *are*. This means, in the platonic philosophy, that truth and goodness are eternal.

It was mainly this interest of Plato and his school in establishing an absolute foundation for morality that led to the platonic theory of universals that played such an important role in defining the general absolutistic framework of Christian

theology. However, the point at issue here is simply the doctrine of universals in matters of value. Mormonism, with most other religious philosophies, strongly inclines toward value absolutism in opposition to moral relativism. Truth and goodness in the Mormon view are fixed eternally in the universe and their reality and status do not depend on what men actually think or do. Moreover, the typical Mormon view does not account for the absoluteness of values in terms of an unchanging intellect or moral will of God, the common position in historical Christianity, but interprets the will of God rather as conforming to the demands of morality. This is an obvious departure from the usual religious approach to values.

Yet even though its moral philosophy has a pronounced platonic character, Mormonism in practice has always exhibited marked pragmatic tendencies. Both William James and John Dewey evidenced an interest in the pragmatic facets of Mormonism, Dewey finding that Mormon group life expressed much that was central in his own instrumentalism.

## VI

The mention of value universals suggests the question of the status of universals in general, one of the most persistent and fundamental problems for both secular and religious philosophy, a problem arising from the conjunction of logic with metaphysics. In one sense a universal is an abstract concept formulated by the mind. Such universals are often expressed by employing the suffixes "ness" or "ity," as in the terms "blueness," or "humanity." The point of calling them universals is to distinguish them from so-called particulars, where a particular is an individual instance, an object or event that in some way incorporates the universal in its essential character. Thus, where blueness or whiteness are universals, blue objects or white objects are particulars. Or where humanity is a universal, individual human beings are particulars. Justice and truth and mercy are universals, while particular instances of just acts or merciful attitudes or true propositions are particulars.

Now the basic metaphysical question regarding universals

asks whether universals are simply words employed to designate similarities among particulars or have some status in reality that guarantees them independent being. The first position is known as *nominalism*, from the Latin term for "word," and the other, since it is that universals have some kind of genuine reality in and of themselves, is known as *realism*. Platonism, as has already been seen, is this form of realism, and as has been indicated, it would appear that Mormon philosophy tends to be in some sense realistic in its attitude toward value universals.

The question of realism versus nominalism has numerous implications for theology and is one to which every theologian must give most careful consideration. In certain periods, as for instance from the eleventh to the fourteenth centuries, the argument over the status of universals has been at the center of philosophical discussion. The doctrine of original sin offers an example of the important role of universals in technical theology. This doctrine has sometimes been justified through realism by the idea that since Adam was the first man, the universal "humanity" was summarized in his being and therefore his sin was a sin of humanity — not of humanity as the collection of individual humans, but of humanity as an eternally real universal. Now a particular human being, so the argument runs, is human through his involvement with humanity, and therefore since humanity is sinful by reason of Adam's sin, every person that comes into existence is sinful by virtue of his humanness.

Mormon philosophy does not have an explicit theory on universals, but at least some realistic inclinations are evident in Mormon ideas, attitudes, and practice. The Mormons tend to describe the priesthood, for instance, as something that is in principle separable from the individual who is said to possess it. They do not favor the nominalistic doctrine that would identify a priest and his priesthood to the extent, for example, of requiring the re-performance of sacraments administered by a person later discovered to be morally disqualified. Faced acutely with this problem in the fourth century Donatist con-

trovery, the Catholic Church, influenced in part by the platonic realism that was mediated to Christian thought through neo-platonism, decided against the nominalistic concept. Mormon practice seems to be not unlike that advocated by the Catholic theory.

Or consider the attitude quite commonly expressed by Mormons when they distinguish between the *Church* and the members of the Church. Here again appears an inclination toward a doctrine of the reality of universals. Apparently what is intended is that the Church is not to be simply equated with the persons who constitute its membership. On the contrary, the view is common among the Mormons that the Church has a kind of reality over and above and independently of all of the particular persons, objects, or events that are involved with it. This kind of reality, of course, is what is intended by the realistic theory of universals.

In the Catholic theory, the Church as well as the priesthood is regarded as a universal, although since the thirteenth century a modified or aristotelian realism has largely replaced the more extreme platonic realism of the early period. The theory of universals that is prominent today in Catholic thought is the product of centuries of learned discussion that has involved the best minds of the Church. Protestantism arose during an era in which nominalism, the theory that universals have no reality, was becoming increasingly strong. Martin Luther, for instance, was greatly influenced by nominalistic philosophy. Protestantism today shows the impact of this nominalism in many ways, as for instance in some treatments of the sacraments, the common conception of ministerial as opposed to priestly authority, or in the typical Protestant theory of the nature of the Church. Here it is commonly held that the Church is the community of the elect, or of the faithful believers in Christ. This is clearly a nominalistic doctrine.

It must be said, nevertheless, that not everything in Mormon thought points toward a realistic theory of universals. For instance, a realistic type of metaphysics has in the past been associated with the traditional Nicene doctrine of the Trinity.



The trinitarian concept, that the three persons of the Godhead are one in substance, was originally supported by a realistic theory of universals in relation to an aristotelian theory of substance. Where the tritheistic conception of the Godhead has appeared, which is the doctrine affirmed in Mormon theology, it has usually been grounded in nominalism, a metaphysical view which in application supports the independent reality of the individual members of the Godhead. Late in the eleventh century, for instance, the celebrated nominalist Roscellinus was accused of heresy in advocating tritheism on nominalistic grounds.

## VII

Finally, some comment may be made on the Mormon position on another basic metaphysical issue, the problem of "necessary" and "contingent" being. Perhaps here is the most important and most interesting distinctive factor in Mormon philosophy. By "necessary" being is meant that being which is possessed by whatever exists necessarily; that is, a thing is necessary or has necessary being if it could not *not exist*. By contingent being is meant that being which is not in itself necessary; that is, something is contingent or has contingent being if it is contingent upon, or dependent upon, something else; it may or may not exist.

Now much traditional Christian theology is involved with this problem, and today, with the resurgence of metaphysical interests in theology and with the rise of existentialist philosophy with its large impact upon both secular and religious thought, it figures prominently in the fundamental discussion of the nature of God and man and especially in the analysis of the human predicament. In general the Christian position in this matter has been the identification of God as necessary being while every other reality has been described as contingent. Only God has the ground of his being within himself; man and the world are conditioned and dependent. The roots of their reality are the creative act of God. Where he is infinite, therefore, they are finite; where he is eternal, they are temporal; where he is secure, they are insecure; and where God's being is identical

with the very fact of reality, the status of man is inevitably in doubt and his existence is precarious. Moreover, in the traditional theology it is the primary sin of man, the sin of pride, that he rebels against his contingency, denies his finiteness, and sets himself thereby in opposition to God. In this he becomes estranged from God, for he denies that his salvation is only by divine grace, and this is estrangement from the ground of his own being. In this estrangement the individual man suffers the anguish that is the inevitable fate of mankind, the anxieties of the meaninglessness of existence, of death and the extinction of existence, and of moral guilt.

The Mormon philosophy is in principle opposed to this general description of the human situation. For in the Mormon concept of reality, whatever may be said of the divine creative activity, it is firmly established that God is not the ultimate ground of all being, and that the human spirit has the foundations of its existence within itself. Whatever the doctrine holds of man's dependence on God, it clearly remains that man's temporality does not separate him from God, that utter contingency is not the condition of his being, for he is not totally God's creature, and that the analysis of the human predicament, therefore, must diverge radically from that given by fundamentalism, neo-orthodoxy, or secular existentialism.

It is the belief that though he is finite man nevertheless has necessary being, that constitutes the philosophical justification of much that characterizes Mormon theology, supporting, for instance, its pelagian and arminian tendencies, and giving fundamental encouragement to its accent on the positive facets of human existence. Here is the philosophical ground for the paradoxical Mormon concept of the fall of man, the denial of original sin, the rejection of the traditional doctrine of grace, the intense preoccupation with the freedom of the will, the opposition to the dogmas of election and perseverance, the liberal estimate of human nature, and the affirmation of the radically unorthodox concepts of God and salvation.

## NOTES

The official canon of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints comprises *The Old Testament*, *The New Testament*, *The Book of Mormon*, *The Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, and *The Pearl of Great Price*. Although the Authorized Version of 1611 is most commonly used, the Church has not designated an official version of the Bible. The apocryphal books are not canonical.

The non-canonical statements of Joseph Smith, which constitute much of the ground for Mormon philosophical discussion, are available especially in the *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, Period I, edited in six volumes by Brigham H. Roberts.

The public statements of Mormon Church leaders during the formative years of the Utah period are recorded especially in the *Journal of Discourses*, 26 volumes, 1854-1886.

The Mormon apostle Orson Pratt (1811-1881), Professor at the University of Deseret (now the University of Utah), especially in his essays "Absurdities of Immaterialism" (Liverpool, 1849), and "Great First Cause" (Liverpool, 1851), proposed an atomistic materialism as the basis of the Mormon conception of reality. Pratt combined the now outmoded nineteenth century conception of matter with panpsychistic and hylozoistic ideas primarily to defend and elaborate the Mormon doctrine of God and the spirit.

William Henry Chamberlin (1870-1921), Lecturer in Philosophy at the University of Utah, 1909-1910, and Professor of Ancient Languages and Philosophy at the Brigham Young University, 1910-1916, undertook to accommodate Mormon doctrine to a personalistic and idealistic systematic metaphysics which he termed Spiritual Realism. Chamberlin's views, which were developed in part within the context of the controversy over evolution and which show the influence of William James, Josiah Royce, Borden Parker Bowne, and George Holmes Howison, are presented in the *Life and Philosophy of W. H. Chamberlin*, 1925, by his brother, Ralph V. Chamberlin, Emeritus Professor of Zoology in the University of Utah.

The cosmic evolution indicated in Mormon philosophy as the context of human development was central in the philosophical thought of Brigham H. Roberts (1857-1933), a member of the First Council of the Seventy and the leading historian of the Church. Roberts' essay *Joseph*

*Smith the Prophet-Teacher*, 1908, and Chapter LXII of Volume II of his six volume official history of the Church, *A Comprehensive History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Century I*, 1930, are vigorous statements of some facets of Mormon philosophy.

The naturalistic quality of Mormon thought was encouraged in the writings of the Mormon apostle and scientist John A. Widtsoe (1872-1952), one-time President of both the University of Utah and the Utah State Agricultural College (now the Utah State University). Widtsoe's naturalistic views are found especially in *Joseph Smith as Scientist*, 1908, and *A Rational Theology*, 1915.

A naturalistic emphasis was characteristic also of the writings of James E. Talmage (1862-1933), an apostle of the Church and also at one time President of the University of Utah. Talmage, a geologist, authored *A Study of the Articles of Faith*, first edition 1899, the most popular handbook of Mormon theology. His essay, "The Philosophical Basis of 'Mormonism,'" 1915, is a concise general statement of Mormon theology but is not concerned with philosophical issues.

The Mormon philosopher Ephraim E. Ericksen, Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at the University of Utah, analyzed the value structure of Mormonism in his *The Psychological and Ethical Aspects of Mormon Group Life*, 1922. Ericksen's study was in terms especially of pragmatic social psychology and instrumentalist value theory.

Mormon religious ideas have achieved moral refinement in the work of the theologian Lowell L. Bennion, Director of the Salt Lake Institute of Religion of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. See especially his *The Religion of the Latter-day Saints*, 1940.

A competent description of the Mormon people, their history and religious ideas and practices, is *The Mormons*, 1957, by Thomas O'Dea, Associate Professor of Sociology at Fordham University.